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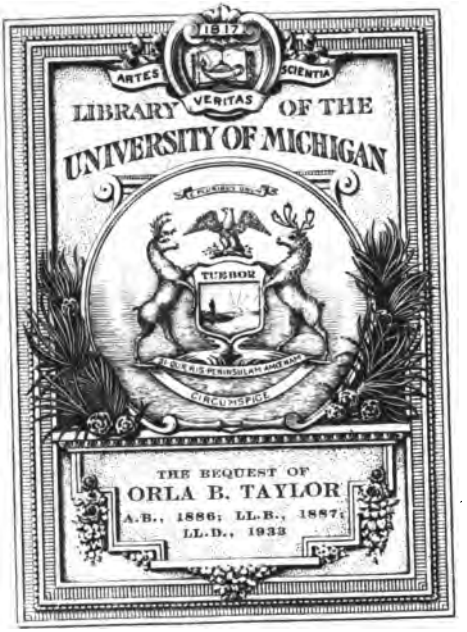
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MRS. MILLER

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By

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MRS. MILLER

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JOHN B. McKINNEY, Attorney and Counselor at Law, as his sign read, was, for many reasons, a fortunate man. For many other reasons he was not. He was chiefly fortunate in being, as certain opponents often strove witheringly to designate him, "the son of his father," since that sound old gentleman was the wealthiest farmer in that section, with but one son and heir to supplant him in time in the rôle of "county god," and haply perpetuate the prouder title of "the biggest tax-payer on the assessment list." And this fact, too, fortunate as it would seem, was doubtless the indirect occasion of a liberal percentage of all John's misfortunes. From his earliest school-days in the little town, up to his tardy graduation

from a distant college, the influence of his father's wealth invited his procrastination, humored its results, encouraged the laxity of his ambition, "and even now," as John used, in bitter irony, to put it, "it is aiding and abetting me in the ostensible practice of my chosen profession, a listless, aimless undetermined man of forty, and a confirmed bachelor at that!" At the utterance of this self-depreciating statement, John generally jerked his legs down from the top of his desk; and, rising and kicking his chair back to the wall, he would stump around his littered office till the manilla carpet steamed with dust. Then he would wildly break away, seeking refuge either in the open street, or in his room at the old-time tavern, The Eagle House, "where," he would say, "I have lodged and boarded, I do solemnly asseverate, for a long, unbroken, middle-aged eternity of ten years, and can yet assert, in the words of the more fortunately-dying Webster, that 'I still live!' "

Extravagantly satirical as he was at

times, John had always an indefinable drollery about him that made him agreeable company to his friends, at least; and such an admiring friend he had constantly at hand in the person of Bert Haines. Both were Bohemians in natural tendency, and, though John was far in Bert's advance in point of age, he found the young man "just the kind of a fellow to have around"; while Bert, in turn, held his senior in profound esteem—looked up to him, in fact, and in even his eccentricities strove to pattern after him. And so it was, when summer days were dull and tedious, these two could muse and doze the hours away together; and when the nights were long, and dark, and deep, and beautiful, they could drift out in the moonlight of the stars, and with "the soft complaining flute" and "warbling lute," "lay the pipes," as John would say, for their enduring popularity with the girls! And it was immediately subsequent to one of these romantic excursions, when the belated pair, at two o'clock in the morning, had skulked

up a side stairway of the old hotel, and gained John's room, with nothing more serious happening than Bert falling over a trunk and smashing his guitar,—just after such a night of romance and adventure it was that, in the seclusion of John's room, Bert had something of especial import to communicate.

"Mack," he said, as that worthy anathematized a spiteful match, and then sucked his finger.

"Blast the all-fired old torch!" said John, wrestling with the lamp-flue, and turning on a welcome flame at last. "Well, you said 'Mack!' Why don't you go on? And don't bawl at the top of your lungs, either. You've already succeeded in waking every boarder in the house with that guitar, and you want to make amends now by letting them go to sleep again!"

"But my dear fellow," said Bert, with forced calmness, "you're the fellow that's making all the noise—and—"

"Why, you howling dervish!" interrupted

John, with a feigned air of pleased surprise and admiration. "But let's drop the controversy. Throw the fragments of your guitar in the wood-box there, and proceed with the opening proposition."

"What I was going to say was this," said Bert, with a half-desperate enunciation; "I'm getting tired of this way of living—clean, dead-tired, and fagged out, and sick of the whole artificial business!"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed John, with a towering disdain, "you needn't go any further! I know just what malady is throttling you. It's reform—reform! You're going to 'turn over a new leaf,' and all that, and sign the pledge, and quit cigars, and go to work, and pay your debts, and gravitate back into Sunday-School, where you can make love to the preacher's daughter under the guise of religion, and desecrate the sanctity of the innermost pale of the church by confessions at Class of your 'thorough conversion!' Oh, you're going to—"

"No, but I'm going to do nothing of the

sort," interrupted Bert, resentfully. "What I mean—if you'll let me finish—is, I'm getting too old to be eternally undignifying myself with this 'singing of midnight strains under Bonnybell's window panes,' and too old to be keeping myself in constant humiliation and expense by the borrowing and stringing up of old guitars, together with the breakage of the same, and the general wear-and-tear on a constitution that is slowly being sapped to its foundations by exposure in the night-air and the dew."

"And while you receive no further compensation in return," said John, "than, perhaps, the coy turning up of a lamp at an upper casement where the jasmine climbs; or an exasperating patter of invisible palms; or a huge dank wedge of fruit-cake shoved at you by the old man, through a crack in the door."

"Yes, and I'm going to have my just reward, is what I mean," said Bert, "and exchange the lover's life for the benedict's. Going to hunt out a good, sensible girl and

marry her." And as the young man concluded this desperate avowal he jerked the bow of his cravat into a hard knot, kicked his hat under the bed, and threw himself on the sofa like an old suit.

John stared at him with absolute compassion. "Poor devil," he said, half musingly, "I know just how he feels—

'Ring in the wind his wedding chimes,
Smile, villagers, at every door;
Old church-yards stuffed with buried crimes,
Be clad in sunshine o'er and o'er.—' "

"Oh, here!" exclaimed the wretched Bert, jumping to his feet; "let up on that dismal recitative. It would make a dog howl to hear that!"

"Then you 'let up' on that suicidal talk of marrying," replied John, "and all that harangue of incoherency about your growing old. Why, my dear fellow, you're at least a dozen years my junior, and look at me!" and John glanced at himself in the glass with a feeble pride, noting the gray

spareness of his side-hair, and its plaintive dearth on top. "Of course I've got to admit," he continued, "that my hair is gradually evaporating; but for all that, I'm 'still in the ring,' don't you know; as young in society, for the matter of that, as yourself! And this is just the reason why I don't want you to blight every prospect in your life by marrying at your age—especially a woman—I mean the kind of woman you'd be sure to fancy at your age."

"Didn't I say 'a good, sensible girl' was the kind I had selected?" Bert remonstrated.

"Oh!" exclaimed John, "you've selected her, then?—and without one word to me!" he ended, rebukingly.

"Well, hang it all!" said Bert, impatiently; "I knew how *you* were, and just how you'd talk me out of it; and I made up my mind that for once, at least, I'd follow the dictations of a heart that—however capricious in youthful frivolties—should beat, in manhood, loyal to itself and loyal to its own affinity."

"Go it! Fire away! Farewell, vain world!" exclaimed the excited John.—"Trade your soul off for a pair of ear-bobs and a buttonhook—a hank of jute hair and a box of lily-white! I've buried not less than ten old chums this way, and here's another nominated for the tomb."

"But you've got no *reason* about you," began Bert,—"I want to"—

"And so do *I* 'want to,'" broke in John, finally,—"I want to get some sleep.—So 'register' and come to bed.—And lie up on edge, too, when you *do* come—'cause this old catafalque-of-a-bed is just about as narrow as your views of single blessedness! Peace! Not another word! Pile in! Pile in! I'm three-parts sick, anyhow, and I want rest!" And very truly he spoke.

It was a bright morning when the slothful John was aroused by a long, vociferous pounding on the door. He started up in bed to find himself alone—the victim of his wrathful irony having evidently risen and fled away while his pitiless tormentor slept

—"Doubtless to accomplish at once that nefarious intent as set forth by his unblushing confession of last night," mused the miserable John. And he ground his fingers in the corners of his swollen eyes, and leered grimly in the glass at the feverish orbs, blood-shotten, blurred and aching.

The pounding on the door continued. John looked at his watch; it was only 8 o'clock.

"Hi, there!" he called viciously. "What do you mean, anyhow?" he went on, elevating his voice again; "shaking a man out of bed when he's just dropping into his first sleep?"

"I mean that you're going to get up; that's what!" replied a firm female voice. "It's 8 o'clock, and I want to put your room in order; and I'm not going to wait all day about it, either! Get up and go down to your breakfast, and let me have the room!" And the clamor at the door was industriously renewed.

"Say!" called John, querulously, hurrying on his clothes, "Say! you!"

"There's no 'say' about it!" responded the determined voice: "I've heard about you and your ways around this house, and I'm not going to put up with it! You'll not lie in bed till high noon when I've got to keep your room in proper order!"

"Oh ho!" bawled John, intelligently: "reckon you're the new invasion here? Doubtless you're the girl that's been hanging up the new window-blinds that won't roll, and disguising the pillows with clean slips, and 'hennin' 'round among my books and papers on that table here, and ageing me generally till I don't know my own handwriting by the time I find it! Oh, yes! you're going to revolutionize things here; you're going to introduce promptness, and system, and order. See you've even filled the wash-pitcher and tucked two starched towels through the handle. Haven't got any tin towels, have you? I rather like this new soap, too! So

solid and durable, you know; warranted not to raise a lather. Might as well wash one's hands with a door-knob!" And as John's voice grumbled away into the sullen silence again, the determined voice without responded: "Oh, you can growl away to your heart's content, Mr. McKinney, but I want you to distinctly understand that I'm not going to humor you in any of your old bachelor, sluggardly, slovenly ways, and whims and notions. And I want you to understand, too, that I'm not hired help in this house, nor a chambermaid, nor anything of the kind. I'm the landlady here; and I'll give you just ten minutes more to get down to your breakfast, or you'll not get any—that's all!" And as the reversed cuff John was in the act of buttoning slid from his wrist and rolled under the dresser, he heard a stiff rustling of starched muslin flouncing past the door, and the quick italicized patter of determined gaiters down the hall.

"Look here," said John to the bright-faced boy in the hotel office, a half hour later. "It

seems the house here's been changing hands again."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, closing the cigar case, and handing him a lighted match.

"Well, the new landlord, whoever he is," continued John, patronizingly, "is a good one. Leastwise, he knows what's good to eat, and how to serve it."

The boy laughed timidily,—"It ain't a 'landlord,' though—it's a landlady; it's my mother."

"Ah," said John, dallying with the change the boy had pushed toward him. "Your mother, eh? And where's your father?"

"He's dead," said the boy.

"And what's this for?" abruptly asked John, examining his change.

"That's your change," said the boy: "You got three for a quarter, and gave me a half."

"Well, *you* just keep it," said John, sliding back the change. "It's for good luck, you know, my boy. Same as drinking your long life and prosperity. And, oh, yes, by the

way, you may tell your mother I'll have a friend to dinner with me to-day."

"Yes, sir, and thank you, sir," said the beaming boy.

"Handsome boy!" mused John, as he walked down street. "Takes that from his father, though, I'll wager my existence!"

Upon his office desk John found a hastily written note. It was addressed in the well-known hand of his old chum. He eyed the missive apprehensively, and there was a positive pathos in his voice as he said aloud, "It's our divorce. I feel it!" The note, headed, "At the Office, 4 in Morning," ran like this:

"Dear Mack:

"I left you slumbering so soundly that, by noon, when you waken, I hope, in your refreshed state, you will look more tolerantly on my intentions as partially confided to you this night. I will not see you here again to say good-by. I wanted to, but was afraid to 'rouse the sleeping lion.' I

will not close my eyes to-night—fact is, I haven't time. Our serenade at Josie's was a prearranged signal by which she is to be ready and at the station for the 5 morning train. You may remember the lighting of three consecutive matches at her window before the igniting of her lamp. That meant, 'Thrice dearest one, I'll meet thee at the depot at 4:30 sharp.' So, my dear Mack, this is to inform you that, even as you read, Josie and I have eloped. It is all the old man's fault, yet I forgive him. Hope he'll return the favor. Josie predicts he will, inside of a week—or two weeks, anyhow. Good-by, Mack, old boy; and let a fellow down as easy as you can. Affectionately,

"BERT."

"Heavens!" exclaimed John, stifling the note in his hand and stalking tragically around the room. "Can it be possible that I have nursed a frozen viper? An ingrate? A wolf in sheep's clothing? An orang-outang in gent's furnishings?"

"Was you callin' me, sir?" asked a voice at the door. It was the janitor.

"No!" thundered John; "Quit my sight! get out of my way! No, no, Thompson, I don't mean that," he called after him. "Here's a half dollar for you, and I want you to lock up the office, and tell anybody that wants to see me that I've been set upon, and sacked and assassinated in cold blood; and I've fled to my father's in the country, and am lying there in the convulsions of dissolution, babbling of green fields and running brooks, and thirsting for the life of every woman that comes in gunshot!" And then, more like a confirmed invalid than a man in the strength and pride of his prime, he crept down into the street again, and thence back to his hotel.

Dejectedly and painfully climbing to his room, he encountered, on the landing above, a little woman in a jaunty dusting-cap and a trim habit of crisp muslin. He tried to evade her, but in vain. She looked him squarely in the face—occasioning him the

dubious impression of either needing shaving very badly, or having egg-stains on his chin.

"You're the gentleman in No. 11, I believe?" she said.

He nodded confusedly.

"Mr. McKinney is your name, I think?" she queried, with a pretty elevation of the eyebrows.

"Yes, ma'am," said John, rather abjectly. "You see, ma'am—But I beg pardon," he went on stammeringly, and with a very awkward bow—"I beg pardon, but I am addressing—ah—the—ah—the—"

"You are addressing the new landlady," she interpolated, pleasantly. "Mrs. Miller is my name. I think we should be friends, Mr. McKinney, since I hear that you are one of the oldest patrons of the house."

"Thank you—thank you!" said John, completely embarrassed. "Yes, indeed!—ha, ha. Oh, yes—yes—really, we must be quite old friends, I assure you, Mrs.—Mrs.—"

"Mrs. Miller," smilingly prompted the little woman.

"Yes, ah, yes,—Mrs. Miller. Lovely morning, Mrs. Miller," said John, edging past her and backing toward his room.

But as Mrs. Miller was laughing outright, for some mysterious reason, and gave no affirmation in response to his proposition as to the quality of the weather, John, utterly abashed and nonplussed, darted into his room and closed the door. "Deucedly extraordinary woman!" he thought; "wonder what's her idea!"

He remained locked in his room till the dinner-hour; and, when he promptly emerged for that occasion, there was a very noticeable improvement in his personal appearance, in point of dress, at least, though there still lingered about his smoothly-shaven features a certain haggard, careworn, anxious look that would not out.

Next his own place at the table he found a chair tilted forward, as though in reserva-

tion for some honored guest. What did it mean? Oh, he remembered now. Told the boy to tell his mother he would have a friend to dine with him. Bert—and, blast the fellow! he was, doubtless, dining then with a far preferable companion—his wife—in a palace-car on the P., C. & St. L., a hundred miles away. The thought was maddening. Of course, now, the landlady would have material for a new assault. And how could he avert it? A despairing film blurred his sight for the moment—then the eyes flashed daringly. "I will meet it like a man!" he said, mentally—"yea, like a State's Attorney,—I will invite it! Let her do her worst!"

He called a servant, directing some message in an undertone.

"Yes, sir," said the agreeable servant, "I'll go right away, sir," and left the room.

Five minutes elapsed, and then a voice at his shoulder startled him:

"Did you send for me, Mr. McKinney? What is it I can do?"

"You are very kind, Mrs.—Mrs.—"

"Mrs. Miller," said the lady, with a smile that he remembered.

"Now, please spare me even the mildest of rebukes. I deserve your censure, but I can't stand it—I can't positively!" and there was a pleading look in John's lifted eyes that changed the little woman's smile to an expression of real solicitude. "I have sent for you," continued John, "to ask of you three great favors. Please be seated while I enumerate them. First—I want you to forgive and forget that ill-natured, uncalled-for grumbling of mine this morning when you wakened me."

"Why, certainly," said the landlady, again smiling, though quite seriously.

"I thank you," said John, with dignity. "And, second," he continued—"I want your assurance that my extreme confusion and awkwardness on the occasion of our meeting later were rightly interpreted."

"Certainly—certainly," said the landlady, with the kindliest sympathy.

"I am grateful—utterly," said John with newer dignity. "And then," he went on,—"after informing you that it is impossible for the best friend I have in the world to be with me at this hour, as intended, I want you to do me the very great honor of dining with me. Will you?"

"Why, certainly," said the charming little landlady—"and a thousand thanks beside! But tell me something of your friend," she continued, as they were being served. "What is he like—and what is his name—and where is he?"

"Well," said John, warily,—"he's like all young fellows of his age. He's quite young, you know—not over thirty, I should say—a mere boy, in fact, but clever—talented—versatile."

"—Unmarried, of course," said the chatty little woman.

"Oh, yes!" said John, in a matter-of-course tone—but he caught himself abruptly—then stared intently at his napkin—glanced evasively at the side-face of his ques-

tioner, and said,—"Oh, yes! Yes, indeed! He's unmarried.—Old bachelor like myself, you know. Ha! Ha!"

"So he's not like the young man here that distinguished himself last night?" said the little woman, archly.

The fork in John's hand, half-lifted to his lips, faltered and fell back toward his plate.

"Why, what's that?" said John, in a strange voice; "I hadn't heard anything about it—I mean I haven't heard anything about any young man. What was it?"

"Haven't heard anything about the elopement?" exclaimed the little woman, in astonishment.—"Why, it's been the talk of the town all morning. Elopement in high life —son of a grain-dealer, name of Hines, or Himes, or something, and a preacher's daughter—Josie somebody—didn't catch her last name. Wonder if you don't know the parties—Why, Mr. McKinney, are you ill?"

"Oh, no—not at all!" said John. "Don't mention it. Ha—ha! Just eating too rap-

idly, that's all. Go on with—you were saying that Bert and Josie had really eloped."

"What 'Bert'?" asked the little woman quickly.

"Why, did I say Bert?" said John, with a guilty look. "I meant Haines, of course, you know—Haines and Josie.—And did they really elope?"

"That's the report," answered the little woman, as though deliberating some important evidence; "and they say, too, that the plot of the runaway was quite ingenious. It seems the young lovers were assisted in their flight by some old fellow—friend of the young man's—Why, Mr. McKinney, you *are* ill, surely?"

John's face was ashen.

"No—no!" he gasped, painfully: "Go on—go on! Tell me more about the—the—the old fellow—the old reprobate! And is he still at large?"

"Yes," said the little woman, anxiously regarding the strange demeanor of her companion. "They say, though, that the law

can do nothing with him, and that this fact only intensifies the agony of the broken-hearted parents—for it seems they have, till now, regarded him both as a gentleman and a family friend in whom"—

"I really am ill," moaned John, waveringly rising to his feet; "but I beg you not to be alarmed. Tell your little boy to come to my room, where I will retire at once, if you'll excuse me, and send for my physician. It is simply a nervous attack. I am often troubled so; and only perfect quiet and seclusion restores me. You have done me a great honor, Mrs."—("Mrs.—Miller," sighed the sympathetic little woman)—"Mrs. Miller,—and I thank you more than I have words to express." He bowed limply, turned through a side door opening on a stair, and tottered to his room.

During the three weeks' illness through which he passed, John had every attention—much more, indeed, than he had consciousness to appreciate. For the most part his

mind wandered, and he talked of curious things, and laughed hysterically, and serenaded mermaids that dwelt in grassy seas of dew, and were bald-headed like himself. He played upon a fourteen-jointed flute of solid gold, with diamond holes, and keys carved out of thawless ice. His old father came at first to take him home; but he could not be moved, the doctor said.

Two weeks of John's illness had worn away, when a very serious looking young man, in a traveling duster, and a high hat, came up the stairs to see him. A handsome young lady was clinging to his arm. It was Bert and Josie. She had guessed the very date of their forgiveness. John wakened even clearer in mind than usual that afternoon. He recognized his old chum at a glance, and Josie—now Bert's wife. Yes, he comprehended that. He was holding a hand of each when another figure entered. His thin, white fingers loosened their clasp, and he held a hand toward the newcomer. "Here," he said, "is my best friend in the

world—Bert, you and Josie will love her, I know; for this is Mrs.—Mrs."—"Mrs. Miller," said the radiant little woman.—"Yes, —Mrs. Miller," said John, very proudly.

JAMESY

JAMESY

ONE week ago this Christmas day, in the little back office that adjoins the counting-room of the *Daily Journal,* I sat in genial conversation with two friends. I do not now recall the theme of our discussion, but the general trend of it—suggested, doubtless, by the busy scene upon the streets —I remember most distinctly savored of the mellowing influences of the coming holidays, with perhaps an acrid tang of irony as we dwelt upon the great needs of the poor at such a time, and the chariness with which the hand of opulence was wont to dole out alms. But for all that we were merry, and as from time to time our glances fell upon the ever-shifting scene outside, our hearts grew warmer, and within the eyes the old dreams glimmered into fuller dawn. It was

during a lull of conversation, and while the philanthropic mind, perchance, was wandering amid the outer throng, and doubtless quoting to itself "Whene'er I take my walks abroad," that our privacy was abruptly broken into by the grimy apparition of a boy of ten; a ragged little fellow—not the stereotyped edition of the street waif, but a cross between the boot-black and the infantine Italian with the violin. Where he had entered, and how, would have puzzled us to answer; but there he stood before us, as it were, in a majesty of insignificance. I have never had the features of a boy impress me as did his, and as I stole a covert glance at my companions I was pleased to find the evidence of more than ordinary interest in their faces. They gazed in attentive silence on the little fellow, as, with uncovered, frowzy head, he stepped boldly forward, yet with an air of deference as unlooked for as becoming.

"I don't want to bother you gentlemens," he began, in a frank but hesitating tone that

rippled hurriedly along as he marked a general nod of indulgence for the interruption. "I don't want to bother nobody, but if I can raise fifty cents—and I've got a nickel—and if I can raise the rest—and it ain't much, you know—on'y forty-five—and if I can raise the rest—I tell you, gentlemens," he broke off abruptly, and speaking with italicized sincerity—"I want jist fifty cents, 'cause I can git a blackin'-box fer that, and brush and ever'thing, and you can bet if I had *that* I wouldn't haf to ast nobody fer nothin'! And I ain't got no father ner mother, ner brother ner—ner—no sisters, neether; but that don't make no difference, 'cause I'll work—at *anything*—yes, sir—when I can git anything to do—and I sleep jist any place—and I ain't had no breakfast—and, honest, gentlemens, I'm a good boy—I don't swear ner smoke ner chew—but that's all right—on'y if you'll—jist make up forty-five between you—and that's on'y fifteen cents apiece—I'll thank you, I will, and I'll jist do anything—and it's coming Christmas,

and I'll roll in the nickels, don't you fergit —if I on'y got a box—'cause I throw up a 'bad' shine!—and I can git the box fer fifty cents if you gentlemens'll on'y make up forty-five between you." At the conclusion of this long and rambling appeal, the little fellow stood waiting with an eager face for a response.

A look of stoical deliberation played about the features of the oldest member of the group, as with an air of seriousness, which, I think, even the boy recognized as affected, he asked:

"And you couldn't get a box like that for —say forty cents? Fifty cents looks like a lot of money to lay out in the purchase of a blacking-box."

The boy smiled wisely as he answered:

"Yes, it might look big to a feller that ain't up on prices, but *I* think it's *cheap,* 'cause it's a second-hand box, and a *new* one would cost seventy-five cents anyhow— 'thout no brushes ner nothin'!"

In the meantime I had dropped into the

little fellow's palm the only coin I had in my possession, and we all laughed as he closed his thanks with: "Oh, come, Cap, go the *other* nickel, er I won't git out o' here with *half* enough!" and at that he turned to the former speaker.

"Well, really," said that gentleman, fumbling in his pockets, "I don't believe I've got a dime with me."

"A *dime,*" said the little fellow, with a look of feigned compassion. "Ain't got a dime? Maybe I'd loan you *this* one!" And we all laughed again.

"Tell you what do now," said the boy, taking advantage of the moment, and looking coaxingly into the smiling eyes of the gentleman still fumbling vainly in his pockets.—"Tell you what do: you borry twenty cents of the man that stays behind the counter there, and then we'll go the other fifteen, and that'll make it, and I'll skip out o' here a little the flyest boy you ever see! What do ye soy?" And the little fellow struck a Pat Rooney attitude that would have

driven the original inventor of the pose mad with envy.

"Give him a quarter!" laughed the gentleman appealed to.

"And here's the other dime," and as the little fellow clutched the money eagerly, he turned; and in a tone of curious gravity, he said:

"Now, honest, gentlemens, I ain't a-givin' you no *game* about the box—'cause a new one costs seventy-five cents, and the one I've got—I mean the one I'm a-goin' to git—is jist as *good* as a new one, on'y it's *second-hand;* and I'm much oblige', gentlemens—honest, I am—and if ever I give you a shine you can jist bet it don't cost you nothin'!"

And with this expression of his gratitude, the little fellow vanished as mysteriously as he had at first appeared.

"That boy hasn't a bad face," said the first speaker—"wide between the eyes—full forehead—good mouth, denoting firmness—altogether, a good, square face."

"And a noble one," said I, perhaps in-

spired to that rather lofty assertion by the rehearsal of the good points noted by my more observant companion.

"Yes, and an honest, straightforward way of talking, I would say," continued that gentleman. "I only noted one thing to shake my faith in that particular, and that was in his latest reference to the box. You'll remember his saying he was 'giving us no game' about it, whereas, he had not been accused of such a thing."

"Oh, he meant about the price, don't you remember?" said I.

"No," said the gentleman at the counter, "you're both wrong. He only threw in that remark because he thought I suspected him, for he recognized me just the instant before that speech, and it confused him, and with some reason, as you will see:—On my way to supper only last night, I overtook that same little fellow in charge of an old man who was in a deplorable state of drunkenness; and you know how slippery the streets were. I think if that old man fell a single

time he fell a dozen, and once so violently that I ran to his assistance and helped him to his feet. I thought him badly hurt at first, for he gashed his forehead as he fell, and I helped the little fellow to take him into a drug-store, where the wound, upon examination, proved to be nothing more serious than to require a strip of plaster. I got a good look at the boy, there, however, and questioned him a little; and he said the man was his father, and he was taking him home; and I gathered further from his talk that the man was a confirmed inebriate. Now you'll remember the boy told us here a while ago he had no father, and when he recognized me a moment since and found himself caught in one 'yarn,' at least, he very naturally supposed I would think his entire story a fabrication, hence the suspicious nature of his last remarks, and the sudden transition of his manner from that of real delight to gravity, which change, in my opinion, rather denotes lying to be a new thing to him. I can't be mistaken in the

boy, for I noticed, as he turned to go, a bald place on the back of his head, the left side, a 'trade-mark,' first discovered last evening, as he bent over the prostrate form of his father."

"I noticed a thin spot in his hair," said I, "and wondered at the time what caused it."

"And don't you know?"

I shook my head.

"Coal-bins and entry floors. That little fellow hasn't slept within a bed for years, perhaps."

"But he told you, as you say, last night, he was taking the old man home?"

"Yes, home! I can imagine that boy's home. There are myriads like it in the city here—a cellar or a shed—a box-car or a loft in some old shop, with a father to chase him from it in his sober interludes, and to hold him from it in unconscious shame when helplessly drunk. 'Home, Sweet Home!' That boy has heard it on the hand-organ, perhaps, but never in his heart—you couldn't grind it out of there with a thousand cranks."

The remainder of that day eluded me somehow; I don't know how or where it passed. I suppose it just dropped into a comatose condition, and so slipped away "unknelled, uncoffined and unknown."

But one clear memory survives—an experience so vividly imprinted on my mind that I now recall its every detail: Entering the Union Depot that evening to meet the train that was to carry me away at six o'clock, muffled closely in my overcoat, yet more closely muffled in my gloomy thoughts, I was rather abruptly stopped by a small boy with the cry of: "Here, you man with the cigar; don't you want them boots blacked? Shine 'em fer ten cents! Shine 'em fer a nickel—on'y you mustn't give me away on that," he added, dropping on his knees near the entrance, and motioning me to set my foot upon the box.

It was then too dark for me to see his face clearly, but I had recognized the voice the instant he had spoken, and had paused and looked around.

"Oh, you'll have plenty o' time," he urged, guessing at the cause of my apparent hesitation. "None o' the trains on time to-night —on'y the Panhandle, and she's jist a-backin' in—won't start fer thirty minutes," and he again beckoned, and rattled a seductive tattoo on the side of his box.

"Well," said I, with a compromising air, "come inside, then, out of the cold."

" 'Ginst the rules—cops won't have it. They jist fired me out o' there not ten minutes ago. Oh, come, Cap; step out here; it won't take two minutes," and the little fellow spat professionally upon his brush, with a covert glance of pleasure as he noted the apparent success of the maneuver. "You don't *live* here, I'll bet," said the boy, setting the first boot on the box, and pausing to blow his hands.

"How do you know that? Did you never see me here before?"

"No, I never *see* you here before, but that ain't no reason. I can tell you don't live here by them shoes—'cause they've been put

up in some little pennyroyal shop,—that's how. When you want a 'fly' shoe you want to git her put up somers where they know somepin' about style. They's good enough *metal* in that shoe, on'y she's about two years off in *style.*"

"You're posted, then, in shoes," said I, with a laugh.

"I ort to be," he went on, pantingly, a brush in either hand gyrating with a velocity that jostled his hat over his eyes, leaving most plainly exposed to my investigative eye the "trade-mark" before alluded to; "I ort to be posted in shoes, 'cause I ain't done nothin' but black 'em fer five years."

"You're an old hand, then, at the business," said I. "I didn't know but maybe you were just starting out. What's an outfit like that worth?"

"Thinkin' o' startin' up?" he asked, facetiously.

"Oh, no," said I, good-humoredly. "I just asked out of idle curiosity. That's a new box, ain't it?"

"New!" he repeated with a laugh. "Put up that other hoof. *New?* W'y, if that box had ever had eyes like a human it would a-been a-wearin' specs by this time; that's a old, bald-headed box, with one foot in the grave."

"And what did the old fellow cost you?" I asked, highly amused at the quaint expressions of the boy.

"Cost? Cost nothin'—on'y about a' hour's work. I made that box myse'f, 'bout four year ago."

"Ah!" said I.

"Yes," he went on, "they don't cost nothin'; the boys makes 'em out o' other boxes, you know. Some of 'em gits 'em made, but they ain't no good—ain't no better'n this kind."

"So that didn't cost you anything?" said I, "though I suspect you wouldn't like to part with it for less than—well, I don't know how much money to say—seventy-five cents maybe—would anything less than seventy-five cents buy it?" I craftily interrogated.

"Seventy-five cents! W'y, what's the matter with you, man? I could git a cart-load of 'em fer seventy-five cents. I'll take yer measure fer one like it fer fifteen, too quick!" and the little fellow leaned back from his work and laughed up in my face with absolute derision.

I pulled my hat more closely down for fear of recognition, but was reassured a moment later as he went on:

"Wisht you lived here; you'd be old fruit fer us fellows. I can see you now a-takin' wind—and we'd give it to you mighty slick now, don't you fergit!" and, as the boy renewed his work, I think his little, ragged body shook less with industry than mirth.

"Wisht I'd struck you 'bout ten o'clock this morning!" and, as he spoke, he paused again and looked up in my face with real regret. "Oh, you'd a-been the loveliest sucker of 'em all! W'y, you'd a-went the whole pot yerse'f!"

"How do you mean?" said I, dropping the cigar I held.

"How do I mean? Oh, you don't want to smoke this thing again after it's a-rollin' round here in the dirt!"

"Why, you don't smoke," said I, still reaching for the cigar he held behind him.

"*Me?* Oh, what you givin' me?"

"Come, let me have it," I said sharply, drawing a case from my pocket and taking out another cigar.

"Oh, you want a *light,*" he said, handing me the stub and watching me wistfully. "Couldn't give us a fresh cigar, could you, Cap?"

"I don't know," said I, as though deliberating on the matter. "What was that you were going to tell me just now? You started to tell me what a 'lovely sucker' I'd have been had you met me this morning. How did you mean?"

"Give me a cigar and I'll tell you. Oh, come, now, Cap; give me a smoker and I'll give you the whole game. I will, now, honest!"

I held out the open case.

"Nothin' mean about you, is they?" he said, eagerly taking a fresh cigar in one hand and the stub in the other. "A ten-center, too—*oh, I guess not!*" but, to my surprise, he took the stub between his lips, and began opening his coat. "Guess I'll jist fat this daisy, and save 'er up for Christmas. No, I won't, eether," he broke in suddenly, with a bright, keen flash of second thought. "Tell you what I'll do," holding up the cigar and gazing at it admiringly; "she's a ten-center, ain't she?"

I nodded.

"And worth every cent of it, too, ain't she?"

"Every cent of it," I repeated.

"Then give me a nickel, and she's yourn —'cause if you can afford to *give* this to me fer nothin', looks like I ort to let you have it fer half-price;" and as I laughingly dropped the nickel in his hand he concluded, "And they's nothin' mean about me, neether!"

"Now, go on with your story," said I.

"How about that 'game' you were 'giving,' this morning?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Cap. Us fellers has got to lay fer every nickel, 'cause none of us is bondholders; and they's days and days together when we don't make enough to even starve on.—What I mean is, we on'y make enough to pay fer aggervatin' our appetites with jist about enough chuck to keep us starvin'-hungry. So, you see, when a feller ain't got nothin' else to do, and his appetite won't sleep in the same bunk with him, he's bound to git onto somepin' crooked and git up all sorts o' dodges to git along. Some gives 'em one thing, and some another, but you bet they got to be mighty slick now, 'cause people won't have 'orphans,' and 'fits,' and 'cripples,' and 'drunk fathers,' and 'mothers that eats morphine,' and 'white swellin',' and 'consumption,' and all that sort o' taffy! Got to git 'er down finer'n that! But *I* been a-gittin' in my work all the same, don't you fergit! You won't ever blow, now?"

"How could I 'blow,' and what if I did?—I don't live here," I replied.

"Well, you better never blow, anyhow; 'cause if ever us duffers would git onto it you'd be a spiled oyster!"

"Go on," said I, with an assuring tone.

"The lay I'm on jist now," he continued, dropping his voice and looking cautiously around, "is a-hidin' my box and a-rushin' in, suddent-like where they's a crowd o' nobs a-talkin' politics er somepin', and a-jist startin' in, and 'fore they know what's a-comin' I'm a-flashin' up a nickel er a dime, and a-tellin' 'em if I on'y had enough more to make fifty cents I could buy a blackin'-box, and wouldn't have to ast no boot o' my grandmother! And two minutes chinnin' does it, don't you see, 'cause *they* don't know nothin' 'bout blackin'-boxes; they're jist as soft as *you* air. They got an idy, maybe, that blackin'-boxes comes all the way from Chiny, with cokeynut whiskers packed 'round 'em; and I make it solid by a-sayin' I'm on'y goin' to git a *second-hand* box—

see? But *that* ain't the pint—it's the Mr. Nickel I' already *got*. Oh! it'll paralyze 'em ever' time! *Some*times fellers'll make up seventy-five cents er a dollar, and tell me to 'git a *new* box, and go into the business right.' That's a thing that always rattles me. Now, if they'd on'y growl a little and look like they was jist a-puttin' up 'cause the first one did, I can stand it; but when they go to pattin' me on the head, and a-tellin' me 'that's right,' and 'not to be afeard o' work,' and I'll 'come out all right,' and a-tellin' me to 'git a good substantial box while I'm a-gittin',' and a-ponyin' up handsome, there's where I weaken—I do, honest!" And never so plainly as at that moment did I see within his face and in his eyes the light of true nobility.

"You see," he went on, in a tone of voice half courage, half apology, "I' got a family on my hands, and I 'jist *got* to git along somehow! I could git along on the square deal as long as *mother* was alive—'cause she'd *work*—but ever since *she* died—and

that was winter 'fore last—I've kindo' had to double on the old thing all sorts o' ways. But Sis don't know it. Sis *she* thinks I'm the squarest mouldoon in the business," and even side by side with the homely utterance a great sigh faltered from his lips.

"And who is Sis?" I inquired with new interest.

"Sis?" he repeated, knocking my foot from the box, and leaning back, still in the old position, his hat now lying on the ground beside him, and his frowzy hair tossed backward from the full, broad brow—"Who's Sis?" he repeated with an upward smile that almost dazzled me—"W'y, Sis is—is—w'y, Sis is the boss girl—and don't you fergit it!"

No need had he to tell me more than this. I knew who "Sis" was by the light of pride in the uplifted eyes; I knew who "Sis" was by the exultation in the broken voice, and the half-defiant tossing of the frowzy head; I knew who "Sis" was by the little, naked hands thrown upward openly; I knew who

"Sis" was by the tear that dared to trickle through the dirt upon her ragged brother's face. And don't *you* forget it!

Oh, that boy down there upon his knees! —there in the cinders and the dirt—so far, far down beneath us that we trample on his breast and grind our heels into his very heart; Oh, that boy there, with his lifted eyes, and God's own glory shining in his face, has taught me, with an eloquence beyond the trick of mellow-sounding words and metaphor, that love may find a purer home beneath the rags of poverty and vice than in all the great warm heart of Charity.

I hardly knew what impulse prompted me, but as the boy rose to his feet and held his hand out for the compensation for his work, I caught the little dingy palm close, close within my own, and wrung it as I would have wrung the hand of some great conqueror.

The little fellow started at me in wonderment, and although his lips were silent, I can but believe that had they parted with the utterance within his heart my feelings

had received no higher recognition than the old contemptuous phrase, "Oh, what you givin' me?"

"And so you've got a family on your hands?" I inquired, recovering an air of simple curiosity, and toying in my pocket with some bits of change. "How much of a family?"

"On'y three of us now."

"Only three of you, eh? Yourself, and Sis, and—and—"

"The old man," said the boy, uneasily; and after a pause, in which he seemed to swallow an utterance more bitter, he added, "And he ain't no good on earth!"

"Can't work?" I queried.

"*Won't* work," said the boy, bitterly. "He *won't* work—he won't do nothin'—on'y 'budge'! And I haf to steer him in ever' night, 'cause the cops won't pull him any more—they won't let him in the station-house more'n they'd let him in a parler, 'cause he's a plum goner now, and liable to 'croke' any minute."

"Liable to what?" said I.

"Liable to jist keel over—wink out, you know—'cause he has fits, kindo' jimjams, I guess. Had a fearful old matinee with him last night! You see he comes all sorts o' games on me, and I haf to put up fer him—'cause he's *got* to have *whisky,* and if we can on'y keep him about so full he's a regular lamb; but he don't stand no monkeyin' when he wants whisky, now you bet! Sis can handle him better'n me, but *she's* been a losin' her grip on him lately—you see Sis ain't stout any more, and been kindo' sick-like so long she humors him, you know, more'n she ort. And he couldn't git on his pins at all yisterday morning, and Sis sent fer me, and I took him down a pint, and that set him a-runnin' so that when I left he made Sis give up a quarter he saw me slip her; and it jist happened I run into him that evening and got him in, or he'd a-froze to death. I guess he must a-kindo' had 'em last night, 'cause he was the wildest man you ever see—saw grasshoppers with paper-collars on, and

old sows with feather-duster tails, the durndest program you ever heerd of! And he got so bad onc't he was a-goin' to *belt* Sis, and did *try* it: and—I had to chug him one or he'd a-done it. And then he cried, and *Sis* cried, and *I* cri—, *I*— *Dern him!* you can bet yer life *I* didn't cry!" And as the boy spoke, the lips quivered into stern compression, the little hands gripped closer at his side, but for all that the flashing eye grew blurred and the lids dropped downward.

"That's a boss shine on them shoes."

I was mechanically telling over in my hand the three small coins I had drawn from my pocket.

"That *is* a nice job!" said I, gazing with an unusual show of admiration at the work, "and I thought," continued I, with real regret, "that I had two dimes and a nickel here, and was thinking that, as these were Christmas-times, I'd just give you a quarter for your work."

"Honest, Cap?"

"Honest!" I repeated, "but the fact is the two dimes, as I thought they were, are only two three-cent pieces, so I have only eleven cents in change, after all."

"Spect they'd change a bill fer you 'crost there at the lunch-counter," he suggested with charming artlessness.

"Won't have time—there's my train just coupling.—But take this—I'll see you again sometimes, perhaps."

"How big a bill is it you *want* changed?" asked the little fellow, with a most acquisitive expression, and a swift glance at our then lonely surroundings.

"I only have one bill with me," said I nervously, "and that's a five."

"Well, here then," said the boy, hurriedly, with another and more scrutinizing glance about him—"guess I can 'commodate you." And as I turned in wonder, he drew from some mysterious recess in the lining of his coat, a roll of bills, from which he hastily detached four in number, returned the roll; and before I had recovered from my sur-

prise, he had whisked the note from my fingers, and left in my hand instead the proper change.

"This is on the dead, now, Cap. Don't you ever cheep about me havin' wealth, you know; 'cause it ain't *mine*—that is, it *is* mine, but I'm a—There goes your train. Ta-ta!"

"The day before Christmas," said I, snatching his hand, and speaking hurriedly, "the day before Christmas I'm coming back, and if you'll be here when the 5:30 train rolls in you'll find a man that wants his boots blacked—maybe to get married in, or something—anyway he'll want a shine like this, and he'll come prepared to pay the highest market price—do you understand?"

"You jist tell that feller fer me," said the boy, eclipsing the twinkle of one eye, and dropping his voice to an inflection of strictest confidence, "you jist tell that feller fer me that I'm his oyster!"

"And you'll meet him, sure?" said I.

"I will," said the boy. And he kept his word.

My ride home was an incoherent fluttering of the wings of time, in which travail one fretful hour was born, to gasp its first few minutes helplessly; then moan, roll over and kick out its legs and sprawl about; then crawl a little—stagger to its feet and totter on; then tumble down a time or two and knock its empty head against the floor and howl; then loom up awkwardly on gangling legs, too much in their own way to comprehend that they were in the way of everybody else; then limp a little as it worried on—drop down exhausted—moan again—toss up its hands—shriek out, and die in violent convulsions.

We have all had that experience of the car-wheels—had them enter into conversation with us as we gaily embarked upon some pleasant trip, perhaps; had them rattle off in scraps of song, or lightly twit us with some dear one's name, or even go so far as

to laugh at us and mock us for some real or fancied dereliction of car etiquette. I shall ever have good reason to remember how once upon a time a boy of fourteen, though greatly undersized, told the conductor he was only ten, and although the unsuspecting official accepted the statement as a truth, with the proper reduction in the fare, the car-wheels called that boy a "liar" for twenty miles—and twenty miles as long and tedious as he has ever compassed in his journey through this vale of tears.

The car-wheels on this bitter winter evening were not at all communicative. They were sullen and morose. They didn't feel like singing, and they wouldn't laugh. They had no jokes, and if there was one peculiar quality of tone they possessed in any marked degree it was that of sneering. They had a harsh, discordant snarl, as it seemed, and were spiteful and insinuating.

The topic they had chosen for that night's consideration was evidently of a very complex and mysterious nature, and they

gnawed and mumbled at it with such fierceness, and, withal, such selfishness, I could only catch a flying fragment of it now and then, and that, I noticed, was of the coarsest fiber of intelligence, and of slangy flavor. Listening with the most painful interest, I at last made out the fact that the inflection seemed to be in the interrogative, and, with anxiety the most intense, I slowly came to comprehend that they were desirous of ascertaining the exact distance between two given points, but the proposition seemed determined not to round into fuller significance than to query mockingly, "How *fur* is it? How *fur* is it? How *fur,* how *fur,* how *fur* is it?" and so on to a most exasperating limit. As this senseless phrase was repeated and reiterated in its growing harshness and unchanging intonation, the relentless pertinacity of the query grew simply agonizing, and when at times the car door opened to admit a brakeman, or the train-boy, who had everything to sell but what I wanted, the emphasized refrain would

lift me from my seat and drag me up and down the aisle. When the phrase did eventually writhe round into form and shade more tangible, my relief was such that I sat down, and in my fancy framed a grim, unlovely tune that suited it, and hummed with it, in an undertone of dismal satisfaction:

"How fur—how fur
Is it from here—
From here to Happiness?"

When I returned that same refrain rode back into the city with me! All the gay metropolis was robing for the banquet and the ball. All the windows of the crowded thoroughfares were kindling into splendor. Along the streets rolled lordly carriages, so weighted down with costly silks, and furs, and twinkling gems, and unknown treasures in unnumbered packages, that one lone ounce of needed charity would have snapped their axles, and a feather's weight of pure benevolence would have splintered every spoke.

And the old refrain rode with me through it all—as stoical, relentless and unchangeable as fate—and in the same depraved and slangy tone in which it seemed to find an especial pride, it sang, and sang again:

"How fur—how fur
Is it from here—
From here to Happiness?"

The train that for five minutes had been lessening in speed, toiled painfully along, and as I arose impatiently and reached behind me for my overcoat, a cheery voice cried, "Hello, Cap! Want a lift? I'll he'p you with that 'benjamin' "; and as I looked around I saw the grimy features of my little hero of the brush and box.

"Hello!" said I, as much delighted as surprised. "Where did you drop from?"

"Oh, I collared this old hearse a mile or so back yonder," said the little fellow, gayly, standing on the seat behind me and holding up the coat. "Been a-doin' circus-business on the steps out there fer half an hour.

You bet I had my eye on *you*, all the same, though."

"You had, eh?" I exclaimed, gladly, although I instinctively surmised his highest interest in me was centered in my pocket-book. "You had, eh?" I repeated with more earnestness.—"Well, I'm glad of that, Charlie—or, what *is* your name?"

"Squatty," said the boy. Then noticing the look of surprise upon my face, he added soberly: "That ain't my 'sure-enough' name, you know; that's what the *boys* calls me. *Sis* calls me Jamesy."

"Well, Jamesy," I continued, buttoning my collar and drawing on my gloves, "I'm mighty glad to see you, and if you don't believe it, just go down in that right-hand overcoat-pocket and you'll find out."

The little fellow needed no second invitation, and as he drew forth a closely-folded package the look of curiosity upon his face deepened to one of blank bewilderment.

"Open it," said I, smiling at the little puzzled face; "open it—it's for you."

"Oh, here, Cap," said the boy, dropping the package on the seat, and holding up a rigid finger, "you're a-givin' me this, ain't you?"

"I'm giving you the package, certainly," said I, somewhat bewildered. "Open it—it's a Christmas present for you—open it."

"What's your idy o' layin' fer me?" asked the boy with a troubled and uneasy air. "I've been a-givin' you square business right along, ain't I?"

"Why, Jamesy," said I, as I vaguely comprehended the real drift of his thought, "the package *is* for you, and if you won't open it I will," and as I spoke I began unfolding it. "Here," said I, "is a pair of gloves, a little girl, about your size, told me to give to you, because I was telling her about you, over where I live, and it's 'a clear case,'" and I laughed lightly to myself as I noticed a slow flush creeping to his face. "And here," said I, "is a 'bang up' pair of good old-fashioned socks, and, if they'll fit you, there's an old woman that wears specs and a mole

on her nose, told me to tell you, for her, that she knit them for your Christmas present, and if you don't wear them she'll never forgive you. And here," I continued, "is a cap, as fuzzy as a woolly-worm, and as warm a cap, I reckon, as you ever stood on your head in; it's a cheap cap, but I bought it with my own money, and money that I worked mighty hard to get, because I ain't rich; now, if I was rich, I'd buy you a plug; but I've got an idea that this little, old, woolly cap, with earbobs to it, and a snapper to go under your chin, don't you see, won't be a bad cap to knock around in, such weather as this. What do you say now! Try her on once," and as I spoke I turned to place it on his head.

"Oomh-ooh!" he negatively murmured, putting out his hand, his closed lips quivering—the little frowzy head drooping forward, and the ragged shoes shuffling on the floor.

"Come," said I, my own voice growing curiously changed; "won't you take these

presents? They are yours; you must accept them, Jamesy, not because they're worth so very much, or because they're very fine," I continued, bending down and folding up the parcel, "but because, you know, I want you to, and—and—you must take them; you must!" and as I concluded, I thrust the tightly-folded parcel beneath his arm, and pressed the little tattered elbow firmly over it. "There you are," said I.—"Freeze onto it, and we'll skip off here at the avenue. Come."

I hardly dared to look behind me till I found myself upon the street, but as I threw an eager glance over my shoulder I saw the little fellow following, not bounding joyfully, but with a solemn step, the little parcel hugged closely to his side, and his eyes bent soberly upon the frozen ground.

"And how's Sis by this time?" I asked cheerily, flinging the question backward, and walking on more briskly.

" 'Bout the same," said the boy, brightening a little, and skipping into a livelier pace.

"About the same, eh? and how's that?" I asked.

"Oh, she can't get around much like she used to, you know; but she's a-gittin' better all the time. She set up mighty nigh all day yisterday;" and as the boy spoke the eyes lifted with the old flash, and the little frowzy head tossed with the old defiance I had noticed before.

"Why, she's not down sick?" said I, a sudden ache of sorrow smiting me.

"Yes," replied the boy, "she's been bad a long time. You see," he broke in by way of explanation, "she didn't have no shoes ner nothin' when winter come, and kindo' took cold, you know, and that give her the whoopin'-cough so's she couldn't git around much. You jist ort to see her now!— Oh, she's a-gittin' all right *now,* you can bet! and she said yisterday she'd be plum well Christmas, and that's on'y to-morry.—*Guess not!*" and as the little fellow concluded this exultant speech, he circled round me, and then shot forward like a rocket.

"Hi! Jamesy!" I called after him, pausing at a stairway and stepping in the door.

The little fellow joined me in an instant. "Want that shine now?" he inquired with panting eagerness.

"Not now, Jamesy," said I, "for I'm going to be quite busy for awhile. This is my stopping-place here—the second door on the right, upstairs, remember—and I work there when I'm in the city, and I sometimes sleep there, when I work late. And now I want to ask a very special favor of you," I continued, taking a little sealed packet from my vest: "here's a little box that you're to take to Sis, with my compliments—the compliments of the season, you understand,—and tell her I sent it, with particular directions that she shouldn't break it open till Christmas morning—not till Christmas morning, understand! Then you tell her that I would like very much to come and see her, and if she says all right,—and you must give me a good 'send-off,' and she'll say all right if 'Jamesy' says all right,—then come

back here, say two hours from now, or three hours, or to-night anyway, and we'll go down and see Sis together—what do you say?"

The boy nodded dubiously, "Honest—must I do all that, sure enough?"

"Will you?" said I; "that's what I want to know;" and I pushed back the little dusky face and looked into the bewildered eyes.

"*Solid?*" he queried, gravely.

"'Solid,'" I repeated, handing him the box. "Will you come?"

"W'y, 'course I will, on'y I was jist a-thinkin'—"

"Just thinking what," said I, as the little fellow paused abruptly and shook the box suspiciously at his ear. "Just thinking what?" I repeated; "for I must go now; good-by.—Just thinking what?"

"Oh, nothin'," said the boy, backing off and staring at me in a phase of wonder akin to awe.—"Nothin', on'y I was jist a-thinkin' that you was a little the curiousest rooster *I* ever see."

Three hours later, as I sat alone, he came in upon me timidly to say he hadn't been home yet, having "run acrost the old man jist a-bilin', and had to git him corralled 'fore he dropped down somers in the snow; but I'm a-gittin' 'long bully with him *now*," he added, with a deep sigh of relief, "'cause he's so full he'll haf to let go purty soon. Say you'll be here?"

I nodded silently, and he was gone.

The merry peals of laughter rang up from the streets like mockery. The jingling of bells, the clatter and confusion of the swarming thoroughfares flung up to me not one glad murmur of delight; the faint and far-off blaring of a dreamy waltz, blown breeze-like over the drowsy ear of night, had sounded sweeter to me had I stood amidst the band, with every bellowing horn about my ears, and the drums and clashing cymbals howling mad.

I couldn't work, I couldn't read, I couldn't rest; I could only pace about. I heard the clock strike ten, and strike it hard; I heard

it strike eleven, viciously; and twelve it held out at arm's length, and struck it full between the eyes, and let it drop—stone dead. Oh, I saw the blood ooze from its ears, and saw the white foam freeze upon its lips! I was alone—alone!

It was three o'clock before the boy returned.

"Been a long while," he began, "but I had a fearful time with the old man, and he went on so when I *did* git him in I was most afeared to leave him; but he kindo' went to sleep at last, and Molly *she* come over to see how Sis was a-gittin'; and Sis said she'd like to see *you* if you'd come *now,* you know, while they ain't no racket goin' on."

"Come, then," said I, buttoning my coat closely at the throat, "I am ready"; and a moment later we had stepped into the frosty night. We moved along in silence, the little fellow half running, half sliding along the frozen pavement in the lead; and I noted, with a pleasurable thrill, that he had donned the little fuzzy cap and mittens, and

from time to time was flinging, as he ran, admiring glances at his shadow on the snow.

Our way veered but a little from the very center of the city, but led mainly along through narrow streets and alley-ways, where the rear ends of massive business blocks had dwindled down to insignificant proportions to leer grimly at us as we passed little grated windows and low, scowling doors. Occasionally we passed a clump of empty boxes, barrels, and such debris of merchandise as had been crowded pell-mell from some inner storage by their newer and more dignified companions; and now and then we passed an empty bus, bulging up in the darkness like a behemoth of the olden times; or, jutting from still narrower passages, the sloping ends of drays and carts innumerable. And along even as forbidding a defile as this we groped until we came upon a low, square brick building that might have served at one time as a wash-house, or, less probably, perhaps, a dairy. There was but one window in the front, and that but little

larger than an ordinary pane of glass. In the sides, however, and higher up, was a row of gratings, evidently designed more to serve as ventilation than as openings for light. There was but one opening, an upright doorway, half above ground, half below, with little narrow side-steps leading down it. A light shone dimly from the little window, and as the boy motioned me to pause and listen, a sound of female voices talking in an undertone was audible, mingled with a sound like that of someone snoring heavily.

"Hear the old man a-gittin' in his work?" whispered the boy.

I nodded. "He's asleep?"

"You *bet* he's asleep!" said the boy, still in a whisper; "and he'll jist about stay with it that-away fer five hours, anyhow. What time you got now, Cap?"

"A quarter now till four," I replied, peering at my watch.

"W'y, it's *Christmas,* then!" he cried in muffled rapture of delight; but abruptly

checking his emotion, he beckoned me a little farther from the door, and spoke in a confidential whisper.

"Cap, look here, now; 'fore we go in I want you to promise me one thing—'cause you can fix it and *she'll* never drop! Now, here, I want to put up a job on *Sis*, you understand!"

"What!" I exclaimed, starting back and staring at the boy in amazement. "Put up a job on Sis?"

"Oh, look here, now, Cap; you ain't a-goin' back on a feller like that!" broke in the little fellow, in a mingled tone of pleading and reproof; "and if you don't help a feller I'll haf to wait till broad daylight, 'cause we ain't got no clock."

"No clock!" I repeated with increased bewilderment.

"Oh, come, Cap, what do you say? It ain't no lie, you know; all you got to do'll be to jist tell Sis it's Christmas—as though you didn't want *me* to hear, you know; and then she'll git my 'Christmas Gift!' *first*, you

know; and, oh, lordy! won't she think she's played it fine!" and as I slowly comprehended the meaning of the little fellow's plot I nodded my willingness to assist in "putting up the job."

"Now, hold on a second!" continued the little fellow, in the wildest glee, darting through an opening in a high board fence a dozen steps away, and in an instant reappearing with a bulky parcel, which, as he neared me, I discovered was a paper flour-sack half filled, the other half lapped down and fastened with a large twine string. "Now this stuff," he went on excitedly, "you must juggle in without Sis seein' it—here, shove it under your 'ben,' here—there—that's business! Now when you go in, you're to set down with the other side to'-rds the bed, you see, and when Sis *hollers, 'Christmas Gift,'* you know, you jist kindo' let it slide down to the floor like, and I'll nail it slick enough—though I'll p'tend, you know, it *ain't* Christmas yet, and look sold out, and say it wasn't fair fer you to tell her,

and all that; and then I'll open up suddent-like, and if you don't see old Sis bug out them eyes of hern I don't want a cent!" And as the gleeful boy concluded this speech, he put his hands over his mouth and dragged me down the little, narrow steps.

"Here's that feller come to see you, Sis!" he announced abruptly, opening the door and peering in. "Come on," he said, turning to me. I followed, closing the door, and looking curiously around. A squabby, red-faced woman, sitting on the edge of a low bed, leered upon me, but with no salutation. An old cook-stove, propped up with bricks, stood back against the wall directly opposite, and through the warped and broken doors in front sent out a dismal suggestion of the fire that burned within. At the side of this, prone upon the floor, lay the wretched figure of a man, evidently in the deepest stage of drunkenness, and thrown loosely over him was an old tattered piece of carpet and a little checkered shawl.

There was no furniture to speak of; one

chair—and that was serving as a stand—sat near the bed, a high hump-shouldered bottle sitting on it, a fruit-can full of water, and a little dim and smoky lamp that glared sulkily.

"Jamesy, can't you git the man a cheer er somepin'?" queried a thin voice from the bed; at which the red-faced woman rose reluctantly with the rather sullen words: "He can sit here, I reckon," while the boy looked at me significantly and took up a position near the "stand."

"So this is Sis?" I said, with reverence.

The little, haggard face I bent above was beautiful. The eyes were dark and tender—very tender, and though deeply sunken were most childish in expression and star-pure and luminous. She reached a wasted little hand out to me, saying simply: "It was mighty good in you to give them things to Jamesy, and send me that mo—that—that little box, you know—on'y I guess I—I won't need it." As she spoke a smile of perfect sweetness rested on the face, and the

hand within my own nestled in dove-like peace.

The boy bent over the white face from behind and whispered something in her ear, trailing the little laughing lips across her brow as he looked up.

"Not now, Jamesy; wait awhile."

"Ah!" said I, shaking my head with feigned merriment, "don't you two go to plotting about me!"

"Oh, hello, no, Cap!" exclaimed the boy, assuringly. "I was on'y jist a-tellin' Sis to ast you if she mightn't open that box *now* —honest! And you jist ask her if you don't believe me—*I* won't listen." And the little fellow gave me a look of the most penetrative suggestiveness; and when a moment later the glad words, "Christmas Gift! Jamesy," rang out quaveringly in the thin voice, the little fellow snatched the sack up, in a paroxysm of delight, and before the girl had time to lift the long dark lashes once upon his merry face, he had emptied its contents out tumultuously upon the bed.

"You got it onto me, Sis!" cried the little fellow, dancing wildly round the room; "got it onto me *this* time! but I'm *game,* don't you fergit, and don't put up nothin' snide! How'll them shoes there ketch you? and how's this fer a cloak?—is them enough beads to suit you? And how's this fer a hat—feather and all? And how's this fer a dress—made and ever'thing? and I'd a-got a *corsik* with it if he'd a on'y had any little enough. *You* won't look fly ner nothin' when you throw all that style on you in the morning!—*Guess not!*" And the delighted boy went off upon another wild excursion round the room.

"Lean down here," said the girl, a great light in her eyes and the other slender hand sliding from beneath the covering. "Here is the box you sent me, and I've *opened* it—it wasn't *right,* you know, but somepin' kindo' said to open it *'fore* morning—and—I opened it." And the eyes seemed asking my forgiveness, yet filled with great bewilderment. "You see," she went on, the thin

voice falling in a fainter tone, "I *knowed* that money in the box—that is, the *bills*—I knowed them bills, 'cause *one* of 'em had a ink-spot on it, and the other ones had been pinned with it—they *wasn't* pinned together when *you* sent 'em, but the holes was in where they *had been* pinned, and they was all pinned together when *Jamesy* had 'em—'cause Jamesy used to have them very bills—he didn't think *I* knowed,—but onc't when he was asleep, and *father* was a-goin' through his clothes, I happened to find 'em in his coat 'fore *he* did; and I *counted* 'em, and hid 'em back ag'in, and father didn't find 'em, and Jamesy never knowed it.—I never said nothin', 'cause somepin' kindo' said to me it was all right; and somepin' kindo' said I'd git all these things here, too—on'y I won't need 'em, ner the money, ner nothin'. How did *you* get the money? That's all!"

The boy had by this time approached the bed, and was gazing curiously upon the solemn little face.

"What's the *matter* with you, Sis?" he asked in wonderment; "ain't you glad?"

"I'm *mighty* glad, Jamesy," she said, the little, thin hands reaching for his own. "Guess I'm *too* glad, 'cause I can't do nothin' on'y jist *feel* glad; and somepin' kindo' says that that's the gladdest glad in all the world. Jamesy!"

"Oh, shaw, Sis! Why don't you tell a feller what's the matter?" said the boy, uneasily.

The white hands linked more closely with the brown, and the pure face lifted to the grimy one till they were blent together in a kiss.

"Be good to father, fer you know he used to be so good to us."

"Oh, Sis! Sis!"

"Molly!"

The squabby, red-faced woman threw herself upon her knees and kissed the thin hands wildly and with sobs.

"Molly, somepin' kindo' says that *you* must dress me in the morning—but I won't

need the hat, and you must take it home fer Nannie— Don't—don't cry so loud; you'll wake father."

I bent my head down above the frowzy one and moaned—moaned.

"And you, sir," went on the failing voice, reaching for my hand, "you—you must take this money back—you must take it back, fer I don't need it. You must take it back and —and—give it—give it to the poor." And even with the utterance upon the gracious lips the glad soul leaped and fluttered through the open gates.

THE END